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R. Geuss: Philosophy and Real Politics

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Introduction

A strong “Kantian” strand is visible in much contemporary political theory, and even perhaps in some real political practice. This strand expresses itself in the highly moralised tone in which some public diplomacy is conducted, at any rate in the English-speaking world, and also in the popularity among political philosophers of the slogan “Politics is applied ethics.” Slogans like this can be dangerous precisely because they are slickly ambiguous, and this one admits of at least two drastically divergent interpretations. There is what I will call “the anodyne” reading of the slogan, which formulates a view I fully accept, and then there is what I will call the “ethics-first” reading.

The anodyne reading asserts that “politics”—meaning both forms of political action and ways of studying forms of political action—is not and cannot be a strictly value-free enterprise, and so is in the very general sense an “ethical” activity. Politics is a matter of human, and not merely mechanical, interaction between individuals, institutions, or groups. It can happen that a group of passengers in an airplane are thrown together mechanically when it crashes, or that a man slipping off a bridge accidentally lands on a tramp sleeping under the bridge. The second of these two examples is a sal-

utary reminder of the role of contingency and of the unexpected in history, but neither of the two cases is a paradigm for politics. Political actors are generally pursuing certain conceptions of the “good,” and acting in the light of what they take to be permissible. This is true despite the undeniable fact that most human agents most of the time are weak, easily distracted, deeply conflicted, and confused, and that they therefore do not always do only things they take to be permissible. One will never understand what they are doing unless and until one takes seriously the ethical dimension of their action in the broadest sense of that term: their various value-judgments about the good, the permissible, the attractive, the preferable, that which is to be avoided at all costs. Acting in this way can perfectly reasonably be described as “applying ethics,” provided one understands that “applying” has very few similarities with giving a proof in Euclidean geometry or calculating the load-bearing capacities of a bridge, and is often more like the process of trying to survive in a free-for-all. Provided also one keeps in mind a number of other important facts, such as the unavoidable indeterminacy of much of human life. Every point in a Cartesian coordinate system is construed as having a determinate distance from the x-axis and from the y-axis. This way of thinking is of extremely limited usefulness when one is dealing with any phenomenon connected with human desires, beliefs, attitudes, or values. People often have no determinate beliefs at all about a variety of subjects; they often don’t know what they want or why they did something; even when they know or claim to know what they want, they can often give no coherent account of why exactly they want what they claim to want; they often have no idea which portions of their sys-

tems of beliefs and desires—to the extent to which they have determinate beliefs and desires—are “ethical principles” and which are (mere empirical) “interests.” This is not simply an epistemic failing, and also not something that one could in principle remedy, but a pervasive “inherent” feature in human life. Although this fundamental indeterminacy is a phenomenon almost everyone confronts and recognises in his or her own case all the time, for a variety of reasons we are remarkably resistant to accepting it as a general feature of the way in which we should best think about our social life, but we are wrong to try to evade it. A further reason to be suspicious of quasi-Cartesian attitudes to human life is that people are rarely more than locally consistent in action, thought, and desire, and in many domains of human life this does not matter at all, or might even be taken to have positive value. I may pursue a policy that is beneficial to me in the short term, but that “in the long run” will undermine itself. This may not even be subjectively “irrational,” given that in the *long* run, as Keynes pointed out, I will be dead (along with all the rest of us), and I may very reasonably, or even correctly, believe that I will be lucky enough to die before the policy unravels. When Catullus expresses his love *and* hate for Lesbia, he is not obviously voicing a wish to rid himself of one or the other of these two sentiments. Not all contradictions resolve into temporal change of belief or desire. Any attempt to think seriously about the relation between politics and ethics must remain cognitively sensitive to the fact that people’s beliefs, values, desires, moral conceptions, etc., are usually half-baked (in every sense), are almost certain to be both indeterminate and, to the extent to which they are determinate, grossly inconsistent in any but the most local,

highly formalised contexts, and are constantly changing.¹ None of this implies that it might not be of the utmost importance to aspire to ensure relative stability and consistency in certain limited domains.

Humans' beliefs and desires are in constant flux, and changes in them can take place for any number of reasons. Transformations of specific sectors of human knowledge are often accompanied by very widespread further changes in worldview and values. People have often claimed that Darwinism had this effect in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. In addition, new technologies give people new possible objects of desire and, arguably, new ways of desiring things. It is by no means obvious that the hunger which was satisfied when Neolithic humans tore apart raw meat with their fingers is the same kind of thing as the hunger that is satisfied by dining in a five-star restaurant in 2008.² Technological change can also make it possible for people to act in new ways toward each other, and sometimes these need to be regulated in ways for which there are no precedents: once it begins to become possible to transfer human organs from one person to another, and manipulate the genetic makeup of the members of the next generation of humans, people come to feel the need of some kind of guidance about which forms of transfer or manipulation should be permitted and which discouraged or forbidden. Changes in political or economic power relations often make it more or less likely that certain groups will move culturally closer to or further away from their neighbours, thus changing people's ethical concepts, sentiments, and views (again, in the broadest sense of the term "ethical"). Politics is in part informed by and in part an attempt to manage some of these changes. In addition, as

people act on their values, moral views, and conceptions of the good life, these values and conceptions often *change* precisely as the result of being “put into practice.” Sometimes one could describe this as a kind of “learning” experience. The total failure of a project that has absorbed a significant amount of social energy and attention, and for which serious sacrifices have been made, in particular often seems to focus the mind and make it open to assimilating new ways of thinking and valuing.³ Thus after the events of 1914 to 1945 a very significant part of the population in Germany became highly sceptical of nationalism and the military virtues, and the experiences of Suez and Algeria tended in Britain and France to throw any further attempts at acting out the old forms of colonial imperialism into disrepute. Sometimes, to be sure, the appropriate learning process does not take place, or the “wrong” lesson is drawn, and this often exacts a high price in the form of a repetition or failure. Thus the larger significance of the Reagan era in the United States was that the political class in power to a large extent prevented any significant, long-term lessons from being drawn from the defeat in Vietnam. Learning, failure to learn, and drawing the wrong lesson are all possible outcomes, and whichever one in fact results needs to be explained, understood, and evaluated. There is no guarantee that “learning” is irreversible, nor can any distinct sense be attributed to the claim that learning in the longer term is natural, that is, will take place *unless* prevented.⁴ Furthermore, even in the best of cases learning in politics seems to be limited either to very crude transformations over long periods—“we learn” over two thousand years that it is better to have a legal code that is accessible to everyone than merely to allow the priests

to consult their esoteric lore—or to what are, in historical terms, very short periods, with little in between. The effects of the short-term learning can often wear off remarkably quickly. Colonial intervention was in bad odour in Britain between the 1960s and the year 2000, but we now (2007) have troops fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan again.

One can speak of politics as “applied ethics” if this form of words takes one’s fancy, but it is not obvious that all the above-described phenomena form anything like a natural kind or a single coherent domain for study by some determinate intellectual speciality: “applied ethics” is just a term applied to people trying to manage forms of action and modes of evaluation that distinguish a good from better or less good as they interact with political programmes, individual and group interests, changes in the economic structure, the requirements of action, institutional needs, and contingently arising historical problems of various kinds.

When I object to the claim that politics is applied ethics, I do not have the above anodyne reading in mind. Rather, I intend a much more specific view about the nature and structure of ethical judgment and its relation to politics, and in particular a theory about where one should *start* in studying politics, what the final framework for studying politics is, what it is reasonable to focus on, and what it is possible to abstract from. “Politics is applied ethics” in the sense I find objectionable means that we *start* thinking about the human social world by trying to get what is sometimes called an “ideal theory” of ethics. This approach assumes that there is, or could be, such a thing as a separate discipline called Ethics which has its own distinctive subject-matter and forms of argument, and which prescribes how humans should act to-

ward one another. It further assumes that one can study this subject-matter without constantly locating it within the rest of human life, and without unceasingly reflecting on the relations one's claims have with history, sociology, ethnology, psychology, and economics. Finally, this approach proposes that the way to proceed in "ethics" is to focus on a very few general principles such as that humans are rational, or that they generally seek pleasure and try to avoid pain, or that they always pursue their own "interests"; these principles are taken to be historically invariant, and studying ethics consists essentially in formulating them clearly, investigating the relations that exist between them, perhaps trying to give some kind of "justification" of at least some of them, and drawing conclusions from them about how people ought to act or live. Usually, some kind of individualism is also presupposed, in that the precepts of ethics are thought to apply directly and in the first instance to human individuals. Often, although not invariably, views of this type also give special weight to "ethical intuitions" that people in our society purportedly share, and they hold that an important part of ethics is the attempt to render these intuitions consistent.

Empirical abstemiousness and systematicity are two of the major virtues to which "ideal" theories of this kind aspire. The best-known instance of this approach is Kantianism, which claims in its more extreme versions that ethics can be completely nonempirical, derived simply (but fully) from the mere notion of rational agency, and the absolute consistency of willing that is purportedly the defining characteristic of any rational agent. Kantian ethics is supposed to be completely universal in its application to all agents in all historical situations. Although Kant does not himself use the

vocabulary of “intuitions” (or rather, he does use a term usually translated “intuition” (*Anschauung*), but uses it with no specific moral meaning), he does think that individuals have in common sense (“der gemeine Menschenverstand”)⁵—presumably post-Christian, Western European common sense—a reliable “compass” that tells them what they ought to do in individual cases. Philosophical ethics does nothing more than formulate the principle that such common sense in fact uses. Kantianism is at the moment the most influential kind of “ideal” theory, but one can find similar structural features in many other views (e.g., in some forms of utilitarianism), and they are the more pronounced, the keener their proponents are to proclaim the strictly “philosophical” nature of the kind of study of ethics that they advocate. A theory of this kind might consist of constraints on action, such as the “Thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not steal” of various archaic moral codes or Kant’s “Never lie even to save a human life”; or it might also contain the presentation of some ideal goals to be pursued, such as “Strive to construct (an ideal) democracy” (or “Strive to construct an ideal speech community,” or “Strive to build socialism”) or “Love thy neighbour as thyself.” The view I am rejecting assumes that one can complete the work of ethics first, attaining an ideal theory of how we should act, and then in a second step, one can apply that ideal theory to the action of political agents. As an observer of politics one can morally judge the actors by reference to what this theory dictates they ought to have done. Proponents of the view I am rejecting then often go on to make a final claim that a “good” political actor should guide his or her behaviour by applying the ideal theory. The empirical details of the given historical

situation enter into consideration only at this point. “Pure” ethics as an ideal theory comes first, then applied ethics, and politics is a kind of applied ethics.

In this essay I would like to expound and advocate a kind of political philosophy based on assumptions that are the opposite of the “ethics-first” view, and so it might be useful to the reader to make the acquaintance, in a preliminary and sketchy way, of the four interrelated theses that, I will claim, ought to structure a more fruitful approach to politics than “ethics-first.”

First, political philosophy must be realist. That means, roughly speaking, that it must start from and be concerned in the first instance not with how people ought ideally (or ought “rationally”) to act, what they ought to desire, or value, the kind of people they ought to be, etc., but, rather, with the way the social, economic, political, etc., institutions actually operate in some society at some given time, and what really does move human beings to act in given circumstances. The emphasis on *real motivation* does not require that one deny that humans have an imaginative life that is important to them, aspirations, ideals they wish to pursue, or even moral views that influence their behaviour. It also does not imply that humans are not sometimes “rational,” or that it would not often be of great benefit to them to be “rational.” What it does mean, to put it tautologically, is that these ideals and aspirations influence their behaviour and hence are politically relevant, only to the extent to which they do actually influence behaviour in some way. Just because certain ideal or moral principles “look good” or “seem plausible” to us, to those who propose them or to those to whom they are proposed—to the prophet or to the people whom the prophet

addresses—it does not follow that these norms, canons, or principles will have any particular effect at all on how people will really act. Even if one were to assume something I am loath to admit, namely, that certain moral principles that have *determinate content*⁶ are “absolutely true” or “eternally valid” or could be “ultimately justified by reference to the nature of reason itself,” this would not automatically ensure that these principles were in fact universally recognised—what truths except utterly trivial and banal ones are “universally” recognised? It would also not ensure that, even if they were recognised, they would be universally obeyed. Finally, a political philosopher cannot take ideals, models for behaviour, or utopian conceptions at their own face value. That the prophet claims and genuinely believes that his table of values will bring peace and prosperity to his followers, and even that the followers genuinely believe this and act according to the table of values to the best of their ability, does not ensure that peace and prosperity will in fact follow. Even if the population did prosper, that would not, in itself, show that the prophet had been right. This could just have been luck, or the result of completely different factors. A realist can fully admit that products of the human imagination are very important in human life, provided he or she keeps a keen and unwavering eye upon the basic motto *Respice finem*, meaning in this case not “The best way to live is to keep your mind on your end: death,” but “Don’t look just at what they say, think, believe, but at what they actually do, and what *actually happens* as a result.” An imagined threat might be an extremely powerful motivation to action, and an aspiration, even if built on fantasy, is not nothing, provided it really moves people to

action. This does not mean that it is any less important to distinguish between a correct perception of the world and illusion. The opposite of reality or the correct perception of reality is in any case not the imagination but illusion; however, even illusions can have effects. The realist must take powerful illusions seriously as factors in the world that have whatever motivational power they in fact have for the population in question, that is, as something to be understood. This is compatible with seeing through them, and refusing steadfastly to make them part of the cognitive apparatus one employs oneself to try to make sense of the world. It is no sign of gimlet-eyed realism to deny the enormous real significance of religious practices, beliefs, and institutions in the world, past and present, but, rather, a sign of simple blindness. This, however, does not imply that the cognitive or normative claims made by religious believers have any plausibility whatever.



Second, and following on from this, political philosophy must recognise that politics is in the first instance about action and the contexts of action,⁷ not about mere beliefs or propositions. In many situations agents' beliefs can be very important—for instance, knowing what another agent believes is often a relevant bit of information if one wants to anticipate how that agent can be expected to act—but sometimes agents do not immediately act on beliefs they hold. In either case the study of politics is primarily the study of actions and only secondarily of beliefs that might be in one way or another connected to action. To reiterate, propounding a theory, introducing a concept, passing on a piece of information, even, sometimes, entertaining a possibility, are all actions, and as such they have preconditions and con-

sequences that must be taken into account. When at the Potsdam Conference in 1945 Truman told Stalin about the successful explosion of the first atomic bomb, this was not merely an exchange of a bit of information about the results of a physical experiment that had succeeded; rather, in doing this Truman was also performing a certain action, one of trying to intimidate Stalin, to discourage him from acting in certain ways, etc. In fact that was the *point* of Truman's action, and, whether one is Stalin or a student of twentieth-century history, one fails to understand the action at all if one fails to take that point. Even general doctrines or complex theories can have distinct effects not merely on particular courses of action, but on the general structure of action in a given society. If utilitarian philosophy, Roman law, Darwinism, Chicago-style neoliberal economics, or "rational decision theory" is taught in *all* the schools, this will probably, to some extent, influence the way agents in the society come to act. This does not mean that we, or anyone, know what the nature of that influence will be. It certainly does not mean that if all schoolchildren are taught "rational decision theory" they will all *become* fully "rational agents" (in the sense specified by the theory) even if they try hard to do so, because the actual consequence might be, for instance, that *some* become more like the purely rational choosers described in the theory than they would otherwise have been, but others find themselves rebelling. Dostoyevski's Underground Man decides he would rather be anything than a piano key or an organ stop.⁸ There is nothing unreasonable about not wanting to be fully "rational" if "rationality" is understood in a sufficiently narrow way. Paul of Tarsus at the beginning of Christianity notably describes the Christian faith as "folly"



(μωρία), but this did not prevent it from informing European sensibilities for a rather long period of time. Six years of constant religious instruction does not ensure religious belief, and six years of public repetition of the demands of elementary hygiene won't make quite every person in the country brush his (or her) teeth after every meal. Still, when the Medical Council issues a warning about the dangers of smoking, this is not merely the enunciation of a scientific result, which can be evaluated according to the usual canons of empirical support, but *also* an intervention that will have effects, one way or the other, on social and political life. The only way to tell what effects there will be is to study them. There is, of course, nothing inherently absurd in holding that when Truman told Stalin that an atomic bomb had been successfully tested, one could make this event an object of two complementary, but distinct enquiries. First, one could study this as an action that will have, and was intended to have, various consequences, and which can be evaluated in various ways, e.g., as appropriate or not, prudent or not, etc.; or, second, one could investigate the content of the claim—that the test had been successful—as something that was warranted (or not) by available evidence.

The third thesis I want to defend is that politics is historically located: it has to do with humans interacting in institutional contexts that change over time, and the study of politics must reflect this fact. This is not an objection to generalising; we don't even know what it would be like to think without generalising. Nevertheless, it simply turns out as a matter of fact that excessive generalising ends up not being informative. There are no interesting “eternal questions” of political philosophy. It is perfectly true that if one

wishes, one can construct some universal empirical truths about human beings and the societies they form, e.g., it is correct that people in general try to keep themselves alive and that all humans have had to eat to survive, and that this has imposed various constraints on the kind of human societies that have been possible, but such statements, taken on their own, are not interestingly informative for the purposes of politics.⁹ Such detached general statements do not wear their meaning on their sleeves; in fact, understanding politics means seeing that such statements have clear meaning at all only relative to their specific context, and this context is one of historically structured forms of action. For an isolated general statement like the one about the human need to eat to be enlightening, one must relate it to issues such as: what form of food production takes place in the society in question, who has control over it, what form that control takes, and what food taboos are observed.¹⁰ If one takes such generalisations to be more than what they really are—mere schemata that need to be filled with concrete historical content—and uses them in isolation as part of an attempt to understand real politics, they will be seriously misleading. People do not eat “food in general” but rice, or wheaten bread, or shellfish, or pork, or they do *not* eat beef or pork or larvae, and people have sometimes willingly starved themselves to death. Suicide through self-starvation is perhaps an extreme case that needs special explanation (of a psychopathological kind, as in anorexia, or of an ideological kind, as with the Irish hunger strikers of the 1960s), but how is one to know beforehand that a given situation with which one is confronted is not extreme? If one wants understanding or any kind of guidance for action, one will have to



take the specific cultural and historical circumstances into consideration. *What level* of historical specificity is required for what purpose is itself a question that has no general answer. Looking for a set of formulae that are as historically invariant as possible and assuming that those formulae will allow us to grasp what is most important will point one in the wrong direction. If one thinks that understanding one's world is a minimal precondition to having sensible human desires and projects, history is not going to be dispensable. The more important one thinks it is to act, the more this will be the case. For as long, at least, as human societies continue to change, we won't escape history.





Finally, the fourth assumption that lies behind this essay is that politics is more like the exercise of a craft or art, than like traditional conceptions of what happens when a theory is applied. It requires the deployment of skills and forms of judgment that cannot easily be imparted by simple speech, that cannot be reliably codified or routinised, and that do not come automatically with the mastery of certain theories. A skill is an ability to act in a flexible way that is responsive to features of the given environment with the result that action or interaction is enhanced or facilitated, or the environment is transformed in ways that are positively valued. Sometimes the result will be a distinct object or product: a shoe, a painting, a building, a boat; sometimes there will be no distinct object produced, as when a skilful marriage counsellor changes the interaction between spouses in a positive way or a vocal coach helps a singer bring out some rather subtle aspects of an overplayed aria. One of the signs that I have acquired a skill, rather than that I have been simply mechanically repeating things I have seen others do,

have been applying a handbook, or have just been lucky, is that I can attain interesting and positively valued results in a variety of different and unexpected circumstances. A skilful painter can produce an appropriate image even using newly created materials that have never before been used for this purpose. To the extent to which the circumstances are genuinely different and unexpected, it is unlikely that there will be any already existing body of theoretical work that gives direct advice about how to deal with them, or models of the successful exercise of skill in those circumstances that could be emulated.

The attentive reader will notice that I use the terms “political theory” and “political philosophy” (the latter sometimes assumed to be more general than the former) almost interchangeably, and that I do not distinguish sharply between a descriptive theory and a “pure normative theory” (the former purportedly giving just the facts; the latter moral principles, imperatives, or ideal norms). This is fully intentional, and indeed part of the point I am trying to make. I want precisely to try to cast as much doubt as I can on the universal usefulness of making these distinctions. Kantians, of course, will think I have lost the plot from the start; and that only confusion can result from failure to make these essential, utterly fundamental divisions between Is and Ought, Fact and Value, or the Descriptive and the Normative in as rigorous and systematic a way as possible, just as I think they have fallen prey to a kind of fetishism, attributing to a set of human conceptual inventions a significance that they do not have. By doing this, in my view, they condemn themselves to certain forms of ignorance and illusion, and introduce into their cognitive and political practice a rigidity and deforma-

tion it need not have. Politics allows itself to be cut up for study in any one of a number of different ways, and which cuts will be most illuminating will depend very much on the context, on what one is interested in finding out. There is no single canonical style of theorising about politics. One can ask any number of perfectly legitimate questions about different political phenomena, and depending on the question, different kinds of enquiry will be appropriate. Asking what the question is, and why the question is asked, is always asking a pertinent question. In some contexts a *relative* distinction between “the facts” and human valuations of those facts (or “norms”) might be perfectly useful, but the division makes sense only relative to the context, and can’t be extracted from that context, promoted, and declared to have absolute standing. However, I also think that the most convincing way to make this point is not by a frontal attack on the Is/Ought distinction, which would be very tedious, given that I grant that one can make the distinction in virtually any *particular* context, as a relative distinction. The Is/Ought distinction looks overwhelmingly plausible because of the way philosophers have traditionally framed the question and assumed one would have to go about answering it. It is the misleading focus on artificially simple, invented examples that seems to give the distinction its hold over us. So rather than talking at great length and to no clear purpose about the Is/Ought distinction in general, I would like to proceed indirectly by inviting the reader to see how much more interesting the political world seems to be, and how much more one can come to learn and understand about it, if one relaxes the straightjacket and simply ignores this purported distinction.



A book of this kind, and especially of this size, cannot possibly treat all, or even any, of the issues it raises in anything like a full and satisfactory way. It also cannot aspire to change the minds of people who already have firmly fixed settled opinions on how political philosophy “must” be done. Rather, the most it can hope to do is address people who have perhaps occasionally had similar thoughts already themselves or those whose views are for one reason or another unformed or unsettled. To them it wishes to suggest the possibility that there might be a viable way of thinking about politics that is orthogonal to the mainstream of contemporary analytic political philosophy.

